



**Interview with C. J. S. “Jack” Durham (1905-1991)
about the Fairfax County History Commission
Conducted by an unknown interviewer on June 30, 1984**

[Start of transcription]

Durham: It's an electric.

Interviewer: It's really an old one, but it still works. So, I still use it.

Durham: Good. How are you coming by the way, a few general observations?

Interviewer: Yeah, I would say I'm about a third of the way through, and I think that probably the remainder will go a lot more quickly now that I feel that I'm more organized. And if, if all things go well, it ought to come a lot more smoothly, I think, from here on out. So it's coming along. It's I know it's been a long time and, it's just that, you know, with moving and my knee and my father was in the hospital, you know, there's always just, it seems like there's one thing after another, and a week or two will go by before I have a chance to get back to it again. So it's, I mean, progress is being made. It's just, it's not as quickly as I would like to see and probably you all as well.

Durham: Nobody's complaining.

Interviewer: Yeah. Yeah. I haven't, I mean, whenever I've talked to people, they haven't seemed to have been—

Durham: At some point, that meeting I didn't go to someone observed— Liz David, that reproduction of some film or those—

Interviewer: The microfilm?

Durham: Microfilm being held up because you had some of the materials.

Interviewer: Right. I have the minutes and I've spoken with her about that.

Durham: Oh, okay. Well that's the only—

Interviewer: And, she, she was going to call me when she needed it to be microfilmed, which was no problem. She said it would only take a few days and it's nice to have those minute books because I can, it's a real good reference to go back to, and oh, just check on dates. When members come in and that kind of thing, so I just sort of check those out of the library and had them for the past few months, but if she needs them, it's no problem I can talk with her about it.

Durham: Yeah. That's the only mention.

Interviewer: Yeah. Well, I've sort of just talked to people about specific things, at this point, but I wanted to spend some time with you and then I'm going to talk to Mayo Stuntz on Tuesday. And I've also talked with, Nan Netherton and I'll probably be talking with her in the next week or so, but I wanted to get somewhat into the project before I spoke with some people, because I wanted to have something to ask them, rather than just say, you know, what have you been doing for the past twenty years?

Durham: Yeah. (Laughter) We'd like to know too. Sometimes, we both know, we forget.

Interviewer: Well, that's a long span of time.

Durham: Two decades.

Interviewer: Yeah, right.

Durham: And I have such a wretched memory about it on some things. Other things I have a very good memory, but between, or amongst the various people, you mentioned you ought to get enough anyway.

Interviewer: Oh yeah, I've gotten a lot of material, just, you know from those interviews.

Durham: Well, fire away Gridley.

Interviewer: Okay, well, I was wondering if there was a particular reason that you were appointed to the History Commission? Did you have a certain expertise or what was your focus?

Durham: Well now, let's see if I can retrieve that from my memory. One of the earliest memories I have is of Bayard Evans making a pitch to the Economic Development Corporation of the county to organize a county preservation landmarks commission. Originally it was thought it might go under economic development. You see Bayard Evans himself was a keen antiquarian. Collected antiques all over the country, but mainly from the New England area. I believe he was from Pennsylvania. I believe he was from Scranton. In any event, the idea seemed at the beginning to be that such a body, advisory body to the Board of Supervisors could play a good role in assessing the county's resources and the field of history. And so I had long been a friend of Bayard's dating back, I guess, to long before the World War Two. He asked me one day out of the blue if I would join him in this enterprise. And I said, I would, I was retired then. I said, I'd be delighted to help him in any way I could. I have no special expertise in the field of history although I have a deep interest in American and European history. As a kid in Louisiana grammar school, I won a \$50 gold piece for an essay on American history.

Interviewer: (Laughter) Even winning a gold piece shows how old, how far back that was.

Durham: Yes, we had gold and silver coins back then in those days. But I took no courses. I graduated college in economics and foreign trade, even though I was eventually to become a newspaper man and a government public relations man. But I think that the fact that I was well known in the area as a conservationist was the thing that made Bayard call on me for any help I might be able to give him because you see conservation itself is a form of preservation. Only it's a preservation of natural resources and the preservation movement is the saving and caring for the cultural artifacts of the country. So I guess it just sort of grew like top seed. And we started out with the assistance of the then manager of the economic development group, but it soon became evident that the county would be better served if there were a separate body, separate advisory body of citizens who were interested and dedicated to the saving of old houses, farm buildings and other structures in the past.

Interviewer: I have some information there that shows more that it was originally begun within the Chamber of Commerce.

Durham: Oh, I think you're right.

Interviewer: Okay. So instead of economic, you think that was the Chamber of Commerce?

Durham: So it was the Chamber of Commerce then.

Interviewer: Okay. Alright.

Durham: See that's my faulty memory there.

Interviewer: Yeah, that's fine. The economic development wasn't ringing a bell and I had seen some them talk about the Chamber of Commerce.

Durham: I think there is an Economic Development Corporation.

Interviewer: There is. I'm sure that the county has one, yeah.

Durham: I don't think they need one today. (Laughter) They're turning the county into another Arlington, you know that place Rosslyn.

Interviewer: Yeah, uh-huh.

Durham: Really, that's the way it's going.

Interviewer: Yeah. Well where I live in Oakton, all that development out there is incredible. Since Bayard isn't here, he can't really speak for himself, but I'm just wondering, does he really deserve a lot of credit for the impetus behind?

Durham: Yes, he does. He, Bayard, I can say this about him because I was always a very good friend of his. Bayard was deeply interested as I say in Americana and he wanted to save large structures like mills and churches and covered bridges and that sort of thing. However, Bayard himself had no specific expertise, I could be wrong on this, but I think I'm correct, in history as such. I mean he would, he, I think he'd get rather bored listening to an account of the structure of the farming communities in the county at the turn of the century, or at least if he didn't get bored it wouldn't mean too much for him. But he was interested in the enterprise because he felt that it would bring tourists to the county and of course that, you

know, he ran a restaurant in McLean for a great number of years. A very good restaurant and which is run by his son now.

Interviewer: Okay, so he really was one of the primary movers and shakers in the early days?

Durham: Yes, he was. I don't think by any means that he was the only one. And Bayard also would turn a lot of people off by his vigorous tact on a problem. And he was always saying, for example, that he could have restored Colvin Run Mill for half the price that the county paid, which of course I'm afraid he could not have done and you know that sort of thing. But he was very active and very vigorous until he got a lot of things accomplished that other people who did not have his drive and energy would not have been able to get accomplished.

Interviewer: Tell me about the early days with all those members. I counted them up at one point. I think there were twenty-some. Weren't the meetings rather unwieldy?

Durham: Yes, very much so.

Interviewer: Is there anything that you—

Durham: I don't know, Bayard picked them out on a kind of an ad hoc basis. I don't really know what his basis was. But it got too big and too cumbersome and the meetings were fun to go to. They were lively but in the early days Bayard held them in his restaurant and the downstairs room where there was a table and a big sideboard, and often there'd be a couple of bottles of whiskey on the sideboard and after a few drinks the members would get highly enthusiastic about the agenda. (Laughter) But— (dog barking) No. No. No. Take her out, she'll be, she's not taping Katie. Katie Brave, that's the Scottish West Highland Terrier.

Interviewer: Uh-huh she's cute.

Durham: Yes, he is. That's the second one we've had.

Interviewer: Uh-huh I guess you get hooked on them, I guess.

Durham: Yeah. But, nevertheless, it wasn't as inefficient, or it wasn't as noisy as it got credit for. But it did lead to the Board as you know, the rumor and gossip got back to the Board, it was just too large a group and even nine members or around

twelve. We now have twelve members. We started out with nine, nine members really is quite large enough, perhaps too large. Five or seven would have been much better, I think. But the Board then set up a new organization and you have the date of it with nine members, one member from each magisterial district. And that's the way it was going for a number of years until the Board again changed it for political reasons to twelve. Some Board member wanted Pat Herrity's job I guess so they enlarged it to twelve members.

Interviewer: So what did lead to the reorganization? What were some of the factors that—

Durham: Well, I don't think it was anything important or mysterious. Perhaps, Mayo, could remember some. I don't remember any specific, shall I say ideological quarrels or political quarrels. It was just a group of twenty-two strong minded men and women who had definite opinions about the preservation of things and they wanted to voice them, that was about all it was. It was sort of like a town meeting, you see. The old New England town meeting and it, as I say, it was unwieldy, a bit unwieldy, but we had this young man Anthony Wrenn. Isn't that it?

Interviewer: Yeah. Tony Wrenn.

Durham: Tony Wrenn. In the very beginning we had him as the executive director, and he was very good at it. But didn't stay long enough perhaps maybe a year or two to bring about order out of the mild chaos that we had settled into.

Interviewer: So, the main, the gist of it was that the Board recognized that this group was too unwieldy and they just thought that by reorganizing with fewer members, that would be more effective?

Durham: Actually, in my view, it was a tempest in a teapot from the beginning. It would have settled down. This occurred quite soon after the board was originally set up and it was a new thing and there's always— well mistakes are always made at the beginning of some venture like that. So that I was rather surprised that the Board took it that seriously. But as I say these men and women had strong opinions and naturally, they'd voice them, which I felt was a good thing. It was an educational process.

Interviewer: From the beginning, I think one of the major functions and purposes of the commission was to identify historic sites. And that whole process seemed to take a long time. I think you are on committees to begin with about identifying the

sites, making lists of them and I think that the members, just from what I can gather reading some of the correspondence and so forth, that they tried to do some of the research about the buildings or the sites. But it never seemed to get off the ground in a full-scale way until Liz David and Nan Netherton were hired to go through and do the research. Is that—

Durham: Yes. You see we, as I said earlier, the citizens who posed the advisory commission, the History Commission were not experts on preservation techniques or the approach to, even the general approach to preservation, although they were in favor of it. And then too Fairfax County, while it is very rich in history, it is not so rich in structures and houses. For example compared to the large manor houses in the James River area. So that the list, the original laundry list as we called it of houses that we thought were worth being researched, was simply drawn up in a kind of common sense way that we had hoped to get people with the preservation techniques to do the research. But it is a slow thing to do and you have to be very careful in your approach to the research. Very cautious of it because it's a quicksand of misinformation as you well know. So that although the list, the laundry list or the list of historic houses, still exists and it's still a working list and it's still quite useful. But I feel that we, in a way we have, I won't say completed our job by any means, but we reached near the end of the so-called a listing of historic houses.

Interviewer: It was just interesting to go through and read some of the minutes from that time and meeting after meeting this would come up and developing the list and how the research was going to be done and committees appointed. And it just, it seemed that without having any staff, it just was too much for the commission could do on its own.

Durham: It was indeed, it was indeed and it was very just a devil of a time to convince the executive officer of the county that we needed one or two people to do the scrub work, you know? And at the beginning there was where the greatest amount of work occurred naturally. And, well, let's see, I think that there was a Mr. Kelly who was quite sympathetic to the aims and goals of the History Commission and he did, he furnished us a budget, I believe of \$25,000 which paid for the executive secretary and Mr. Wrenn who I believe worked on a part time basis. You might check that. But after Mr. Kelly left, we went into a period of innocuous destitute, the phrase goes, for a long time because we couldn't interest the County Executive and had his assistants, particularly those in the planning division that we needed help and we need it very badly. And then of course, when Tony Wrenn left, why we were left high and dry and each member tried to do a little bit of the work,

but as always, and in such cases it fell to the lot of the chairman or chairwoman of the commission to carry the administrative load. Answering letters and telephones and so forth and so on.

Interviewer: But as of this point you feel that, do sites come up very often at the History Commission meeting?

Durham: No, they don't anymore.

[Recording paused]

Interviewer: I just don't know is there anybody that—

Durham: Oh, the black history?

Interviewer: About the black history? I might talk to that—

Durham: Yes. I'm very much interested in the black history, but I have again no particular expertise personally in that field. And as a matter of fact, that field is a very late comer in the shall we say the academic discipline and other studies. But I think it's growing, and I think it's due to the influence of the commission. I think there that the commission really made a real contribution to the history of Fairfax County. Now I think the person who would, who should be able to help you in that is Don Sweig. Don Sweig. He's done two or three things that are very good in that field.

Interviewer: So he would be one of the main people to talk to there.

Durham: Yeah.

Interviewer: Okay. Let's see, I've also done the oral history, that's why I was talking to Donnie Rieger and I talked to Dr. Rosenzweig about that too. And then Donnie also mentioned the distinguished service awards that the commission has given and I thought it would be nice to include a list of those.

Durham: Sure. Very good. Very good.

Interviewer: And another part that I would like to do is about the historic districts. I haven't really— I thought I would do the Inventory of Historic Sites first and then

sort of that I think that the historic districts is a natural outgrowth of identifying the historic sites.

Durham: I think that this would be a matter of judgement or space or your own editorial judgement, I think it would be interesting to put the whole list in the book.

Interviewer: Of the historic sites?

Durham: Of the historic sites and the historic districts.

Interviewer: Yeah, mmmm, yeah I think that would be useful.

Durham: As documents. You might put it in the appendix or something like that.

Interviewer: Right, mmmm, yeah. Where do you see the History Commission going from here? Are there any things that you all are working on or any direction that you think?

Durham: Well, I don't know. I haven't given it much thought, really. What I think we should be doing is to be doing more on the public relations front. As a matter of fact, that's part of our charter. The Board wanted us to engage the public and explain to them the necessity for preserving these old houses and structures and I think we have not done enough of that. But that's one thing we could do in the future. And I think if we could do more of same, only on a broader front and with more vigor and with more money. It would help. I think we should do more, resume publication of the books on the sites and I think that we should encourage schools as we've done. We've done a very good job there and Ginny Peters among others deserves a great deal of credit for that work. Well you see, when the Park Authority installed its history section, then it became an office that could do a lot this work. And they have done some, but I think again they too could do more. I must say, I was largely responsible for getting that unit set up in the Park Authority.

Interviewer: How was that?

Durham: Through engaging of Frederick Gutheim to make a study of the needs of a history program in Fairfax County some years ago, maybe four or five years ago.

Interviewer: I've seen that document, yeah.

Durham: And he, I thought, did a very good job. But here, you see, the Park Authority is limited to its own structures, and so they can't take on the whole job.

Interviewer: So, involvement in the schools, more public awareness history in the county, the publications those are all some of the things you see the History Commission doing?

Durham: Yeah. I think that it was my hope at least, that out of this enterprise you're engaged on, it would stimulate thinking, you know as to well where are we going, what should we do? And I hope it may do that. Now I believe Mayo, I was not at the meeting, but I believe Mayo Stuntz asked Liz David and Don Sweig to come up with their ideas of what we should be doing in the future. And you can ask them about that. Another thing I'd like to see done, although it's quite far piece down the road is to take a leading part in the celebration of the bicentennial of the Constitution and Bill of Rights because you see we have the charming house of George Mason in our county and it's been sadly overlooked by the public at large and the nation anyway, and perhaps in the state of Virginia for all I know. But I think this is a great shame. I think Mason was a great statesman and has never quite received his due. And the house itself is an absolute jewel.

Interviewer: Yeah, I've never been through it. I know where it is. But I've never dropped by there. I'll have to do that.

Durham: You must do that.

Interviewer: What do you think have been some of the major contributions of the History Commission? I mean I know that there are so many, I'm just wondering if we could summarize a little bit. Certainly the preservation of some of the historic sites or the awareness.

Durham: I think the very existence of the commission has— and its limited help that it could offer the citizens of the county owing to lack of funds. We still get no more than \$25,000 a year which we had, that's what we were given twenty years ago. But the very fact of our existence, we are kind of an idea group, team if you want to, and people will come from all over the county asking about this that and the other thing and we just give forth on them and before you know the problem is well on its way to being solved. Now the— well I guess I lost the train of my thought there.

Interviewer: You were talking about when people need help about things, the History Commission can sort of set the path for.

Durham: Oh, yes, now as a result, there have been numerous historic groups set up in various towns and areas of the county. I can't give you a list of them now, but you can get one I'm sure from Liz. For example, Herndon would be one.

Interviewer: One in Great Falls.

Durham: And Great Falls and course Falls Church had its for a long time.

Interviewer: I hadn't thought about those at all, but that's certainly true that there are these groups around the county.

Durham: We work of fertilized the ground and dropped a few seeds here and there and they're doing excellent work. Absolute first-rate work. And they've restored a lot of things and you might get a list of those.

Interviewer: Yeah, right, uh-huh.

Durham: Collectively as an example.

Interviewer: That would be interesting to have. It certainly seems like this county has an awareness of history.

Durham: Oh, yes.

Interviewer: It is a pretty rich county as far as that goes.

Durham: Oh my goodness. Reflect a moment. Our budget, when I came out here in 1933, I think our budget was \$250,000. And now the county's budget is a billion, a billion dollars.

Interviewer: Is it really a billion dollars?

Durham: Yeah, yeah. And I think that's startling, even though half a century has passed. Here in Fairfax County when I came out here was a cultural backwater or perhaps a geographical backwater. Farmers, the whole county was nothing but farms. Oh, there might've been one or two industries, but they were very small and insignificant, you know. And now we have a population close to 600,000. That's

much bigger than the whole state of Vermont for example. Many more people than the state of Vermont and it's a good-sized city. It's a number for a good-sized city.

Interviewer: Well that's really the major things that I wanted to ask you.

Durham: Well I'm afraid I haven't been too helpful.

Interviewer: I think that's, you know, I just really needed a little bit of information about the beginning years and some about the transition and you know that's— I just needed a little bit, and about the— because the part that I'm writing about right now is about the Inventory of Historic Sites and so I just needed to get a little bit of a few quotes about that.

Durham: Well, you see as you know good writing is good rewriting and—

Interviewer: Yeah, uh-huh. (Laughter) Yeah, I'm inserting all these things as I go along.

Durham: So, don't be dismayed if you don't hit the bullseye on the first draft. But you may want to change your whole approach somewhere down the line.

Interviewer: Yeah, yeah. Especially when talking to so many people, I've just got to sort of insert their comments at the right point and so once I get all of that done then I can go back.

Durham: You can pull it all together.

Interviewer: Yeah, mmmm. Okay. Well also as you go along, I know you've gotten information for me, as you go along if you think of things where the History Commission has received awards or done things like that just, I know that you've kept that in mind.

Durham: Yes, I guess I should've said that with the History Commission has been a forerunner in the whole country and has received quite a few awards for its work, in recognition of its work.

Interviewer: I'm trying to collect those things as I go along. Talking to Tony Wrenn, he knew of a couple of things that the History Commission got.

Durham: Yeah, Tony would be good for that. Mayo would be good for that.

Interviewer: Did you ever find the charter?

Durham: No!

Interviewer: I looked through all the stuff that you gave me and I was certain I didn't have it, so.

Durham: I think I do remember your sending it back, but my files are in execrable disarray and I never was a good file clerk. (Laughter)

Interviewer: Well I would think that somebody like Liz David would probably have it.

Durham: Oh, Liz would have it.

Interviewer: So, I don't know who needed it.

[End of transcription]

Transcribed by Chris Barbuschak, June 2020